



Commentary

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There is a taste for the unpredictable in Penny Siopis's ink and glue paintings, which allows new possibilities to emerge from the artist's plans. A play with images that recalls human experiences of excess, disorder, violence and grief is rendered through a skilful, sensuous and performative use of viscous materials. The works appear elemental and mythological, personal and political at the same time, but they are also constantly uncertain, as if they were on the move. 'What happens when ink and glue acts on a surface is unpredictable and exciting. This unpredictability creates a certain tension or energy between form and formlessness, balancing them on a knife edge,' Siopis explains. The border between form and formlessness is uncertain: where anything might emerge, a patient suspension of disbelief is required in order to let images come into being and visibility. Siopis waits for the glue to thicken and the colour to dry and set without intervening in the process of transformation: 'The knife edge is a precarious condition where a slip and a split can happen,' she says, referring to her passion for turning points and surprises:

An Artist's Dance through Medium and Vision¹

— Alessandra De Angelis

The times seem to have made me hypersensitive to all sorts of imagery, especially that which marks ambivalence and the imponderable. In South Africa now we are confronted with the estrangement and dislocation that come with deep uncertainty about the stability of what we might call the social contract. At the same time, this instability might be an occasion for exhilarating change. It's a time of flux, a time which can congeal into sheer horror or open up to sheer ecstasy.²

Siopis's interest in the politics of reconciliation in South Africa is mediated and transfigured through a special kind of artistic sensitivity, which enables her not so much to represent, but rather to refigure and reimagine the social, intertwined with the psychical and the personal, and thereby to reveal the potentiality of becoming that she recognizes as a fundamental part of human experience. Her *modus operandi* translates the ethical into the aesthetic: two differently articulated dimensions that coexist without separation in her art. In the mundane world (not in the abstract realm of ideas)

Mate
2007
Ink, oil and glue on paper
25 x 17.5cm

Three Trees
2009
Ink and glue on canvas
200 x 250cm



ethos and *aisthesis* coincide in a kind of dance that interconnects all living forms, and to the ecological mind the ethical gesture is thus always the most beautiful, implying neither moral, metaphysical principles nor essence. The ethics of life becomes the stochastic process of the proliferation and articulation of difference through unforeseeable encounters, interactions and codifications.³ This is where the unpredictability of Siopis's art is pertinent. It is made of encounters between imaginings and solid matter, free – or nearly free – formal processes and the inescapable ultimate limits of the medium. The body of art becomes movement *and* arrest, process *and* form; more especially, it is virtual *and* material, dialectically intertwining intensive and extensive elements. The 'wonder' here, to use Brian Massumi's words, is that 'there can be stasis given the primacy of process, "order out of chaos";⁴ that choreographies and images can emerge from bodily, mental and material flows and movement.

In fact, it is the insistence on the performative nature of painting that keeps it close to dance and movement, resembling a choreography rather than an architecture. If, as Erin Manning suggests, choreography emerges only as 'reaction to a movement' and is never prior to it, in the same way an image or painting is the result of a potentially unending process, and in a constant relation to the responses of its public. Movement is the force that consigns images to the future, to the not-yet that is momentarily hosted in the present. Movement 'creates the potential for unthinking dichotomies that populate our world ... [and] allows us to approach them from a different perspective: a shifting one'.⁵ Ethics and aesthetics become one relational field of interaction and contact, a dance through medium and vision (both the artist's vision, which must cope with the resistance of materials, and the public's vision and perception). Thus the public's encounter with the work of art becomes a sensorial one in which not only beauty but also change is experienced, while hermeneutics is substituted by participation and by the capability of being vulnerable to art.

Human encounters can be ambiguous and double-edged. A 'poetics of vulnerability', to

Wrest
2009
Ink and glue on canvas
90 x 90cm



quote the phrase Siopis used in relation to her *Lasso* exhibition, implies being weak and subject to the violence of others (or seeking protection from it) and, at the same time, being more open to the world and its sufferings. This double side of perception is emphasized by the artist's choice of medium. Through layers of viscous glue, she is able to cover or reveal, binding images together and making them liquefy or thicken, or even appear to be decomposing. The material is in fact as thin as human skin, and can convey and play with the sense of both exposure and protection. 'We live in turbulent times,' the artist writes:

The integrity of our bodies and souls seems challenged at every turn. We are prey to violence, disease, global conflicts. We are so thin-skinned. ... The poetics to which I am devoted emphasizes as much the materiality of the image as its content or concept. Viscous glue can drop in a way that makes the image – or person depicted – appear decomposing, coming apart. ... Glue can also cover the image like a protective second skin.⁶

yet are kept on the threshold of becoming. Through this 'choreography of chance and control' the unseen assumes materiality and visibility without being explained or fixed into schemes.⁸ Conversely, the unseen is enhanced through affects that stimulate response and the reformulation of old thoughts. We are not far from what has been proposed by feminist thought, as well as *écriture féminine*, since Luce Irigaray's reply to Freud and Lacan in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974), and Hélène Cixous's in 'Le rire de la Méduse' (1975): making the abject and the secret visible, capable of stimulating thought through primordial emotions – including that of 'shame'.

The boundlessness of women's relationships to their own bodies and to those of their dearest is touched on in paintings (*Twins*, *Wrest* and *Cling* from 2009; *Bound* and *Mate* from 2007) which show mothers and children, lovers or twins clinging to each other, their limitless, almost indecipherable

Left
Flush
2007
Ink, oil and glue on paper
27 x 36cm

Below
Cocoon
2007
Ink and glue on paper
27 x 37cm

Opposite
Anonymous
2009
Ink and glue on canvas
70 x 58cm



As Judith Butler makes clear in her recent writings about war, frailty, loss and mourning, it is vulnerability that makes living creatures' experience on earth comprehensible and shareable, and this calls for a different, delicate and responsible approach to politics and ethics,⁷ a call Siopis seems to make her own through art. Hardly any specific allusions to politics appear in her recent work; yet the focus on hybridity and the unpredictable and uncontrollable shapes assumed by life is itself a political theme. Energetic, shapeless streams of reddish, fleshy colours invoke the loss of any sense of judgement: viewers are embraced by the carnal relationships that society fears and proscribes, and this turns into a contestation of heteronormative and separatist rules of power. Yet by choosing fluidity as subject and meaning, and waiting for the latter to thicken, the artist is enabled to give shape to formless suffering and emotions, thereby creating a new symbolic order. Enlivened by the beauty and sensuousness of the paintings, despite the harshness of the floods of blood contained within them, carnal and symbiotic relationships are made intelligible and enjoyable. Things unspeakable, such as menstrual blood, take form, deprived of their aura of taboo, and



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figures immersed in flows of hot colours recalling blood and flesh. What the modern, white and Western imaginary holds to be primitive and dangerous, 'abject' in Kristeva's term, reacquires a quality of unlimited beauty in Siopis's art, even when these 'carnal documents' denounce conditions of sexual slavery or gender biases.

In *Three Trees* (2009), an extraordinarily tangible display of raw materials evokes an aura of visceral explosion, stemming from an unbounded experience of fluidity. Despite the horror of the scene, inspired by a Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock print Siopis found in a book on erotic art, the artist distils its profoundly ambiguous intertwining of eroticism and violence into a dreamlike atmosphere of distance.⁹ Erotic form and traumatic content enter into collusion: an image of rape painted in red and fleshy pink – a woman whose limbs are tied to the trees, her legs opened by two satanic male figures – confronts the viewer's sense of shame and perplexity, which stems from their response to the incredible beauty of the painting. The work is ambiguously exciting, evoking primordial sensuous responses while blurring moral limits.¹⁰ Its passion eludes attempts to control the aesthetic experience, while an unaffected but not unaffffecting emotional distance bewilders and disturbs the viewer, even as it enhances the challenge of the artistic encounter. This confusion of spheres and psychic 'locations' challenges the moralistic demand for a rigid separation between the spheres of the ethos (the 'ideal', or the superegoic structure) and the real (the world of drives and mere materiality). Yet the painting also functions as a reminder of the lack of symbolic references in the erotic imaginary, and the depersonalization of the emotions and feelings connected to violence opens new constellations of thoughts, and new associations and framing contexts. Trauma deprived of individual features and psychological connotations becomes an 'affect' that could give rise to different perceptions of – and relations to – reality. Viewers are thus enabled to contemplate the social, imaginary, mental and 'discursive' structures of reality, as well as the imaginary sexual archetypes that frame the male erotic psyche.¹¹



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Twins
2009
Oil, ink and glue on canvas
100 x 100cm

Confusion and boundlessness are also part of *Flush* and *Melt* (2007), which both evoke women's apparent lack of psychic and bodily limits, according to male or, more generally, social stereotypes. Traumatic content becomes a starting point for reflection, as glue, imbued with red and pink colours, recalls the blood and placenta through which women frame and are framed, give life and are given life. The glue, which suggests both containment and boundlessness, shapes not only human or animal features, but whole landscapes. In *Melt*, the glue seems to flow from the hair of a woman-goddess, drawing the outlines of mountains and seas and giving birth to an entire world out of blood, love and chaos. In this carnal Genesis, a tiny female creature appears, like a newborn woman, reaching a hand to the viewers.

The coexistence of different spheres is also evident in *Still Waters* (2009), where heritage

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is contaminated, rethought, and oriented to the emergence of the contemporary world. The sight of a huge shoal of jellyfish invading Thessaloniki harbour had raised visions in the artist's mind of Ophelia, of Monet's *Water Lilies*, and a migrant drowning in the Aegean, a traumatic, imagined scene. The flow of blues and greens, spotted by touches of yellow, recalls Monet, confounding his water lilies with the shapes of the jellyfish, mixing art history, dream and memory, and also addressing the contemporary question of migration and its impact on political obligations. At the centre of the painting is the face of a woman, 'a person who seems to be either swamped by the mass or emerging from it ... coming up for breath', looking into our eyes and drawing us into the painting.¹² The dreamlike atmosphere enhances the viewer's confrontation with this strange mix of contemporaneity and heritage, nature and vision, pushed beyond the 'disciplines' that separate genres.

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